

2022 Issue 1 | Free

SPARK

The magazine of Humanities Washington.

*How the Northwest
shocked the hip-hop world*

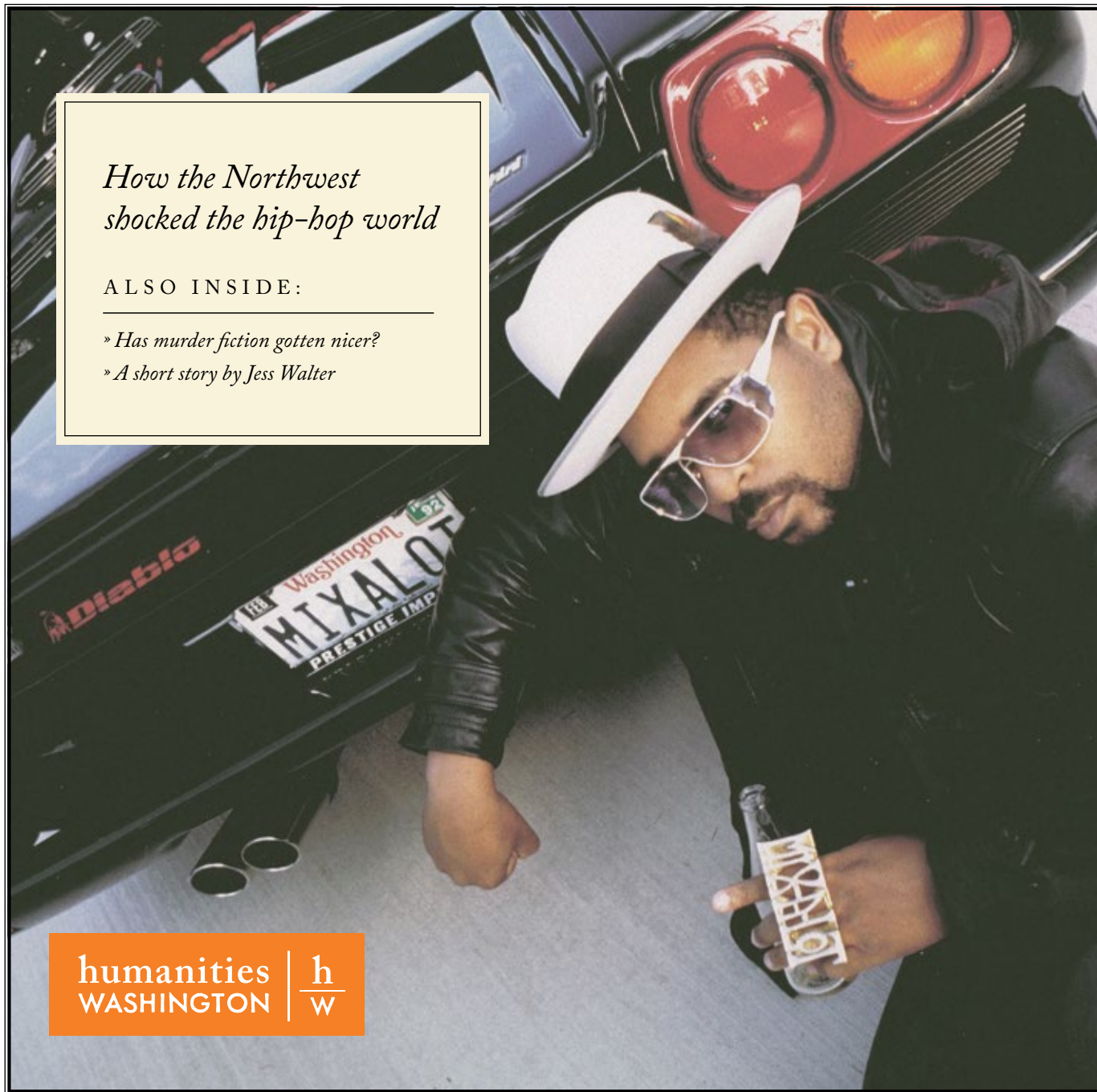
ALSO INSIDE:

» *Has murder fiction gotten nicer?*

» *A short story by Jess Walter*

humanities
WASHINGTON

h
w



Spark is a publication of nonprofit Humanities Washington, our state's affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Online and at community venues across Washington, we hold hundreds of free events each year where scholars, authors, artists, and activists discuss everything from Washington

State history to current social issues.

Published twice per year, *Spark* is a free magazine based on those conversations.

It's available at cultural organizations throughout the state, or you can have *Spark* delivered for free to your door by signing up at humanities.org.

EDITOR:

David Haldeman

LAYOUT & DESIGN:

Tarsha Rockowitz

COPYEDITOR:

George Abeyta

More stories online at humanities.org/blog

Find a free event at humanities.org

FOLLOW US ONLINE:



Spark is dedicated to publishing a variety of perspectives.

Opinions expressed are those of the author and may not reflect the viewpoints of Humanities Washington's staff, board, funders, or partners.

Cover photo by Jules Frazier.

INSIDE

THE EVOLUTION OF CRIME FICTION IN 14 MURDERS

by *Matthew Sullivan* 4-8

YOU TOO COULD BE A SAMURAI

by *Jefferson Robbins* 9-11

HOW THE NORTHWEST SHOCKED THE HIP-HOP WORLD

by *Daudi Abe* 12-17

RETURN TO AFROREMENTIONED ISLAND

by *Jess Walter* 18-22

AN INTERVIEW WITH RENA PRIEST, WASHINGTON STATE POET LAUREATE

by *Samantha Allen* 24-27

NEWS

from *Humanities Washington* 28-29

HUMANITIES WASHINGTON

Staff & Programs 30-31

Every generation feels like their era is moving faster than the one before. Yet there's a case to be made that we are currently living through the most rapidly changing era in human history.

Even if you've managed to avoid the avalanche of new technologies that have radically altered how we communicate, the pandemic forced change on everyone, and at a suddenness and pace not seen in a century. Social change has also been rapid. Major changes in how we think about identity, particularly around gender and race, have taken place, and we've seen calls for societal change intensify. Change can be good, bad, frightening, exciting, and disorienting.

But while technologies and societies evolve, our core human needs do not. Aside from essentials like food and shelter, we all need connection, community, meaning, and purpose. The humanities help us find our center; they reach into our hearts to help us understand what changes are doing good and which are doing harm. They help us find meaning and connection, providing a calm island in the rough sea.

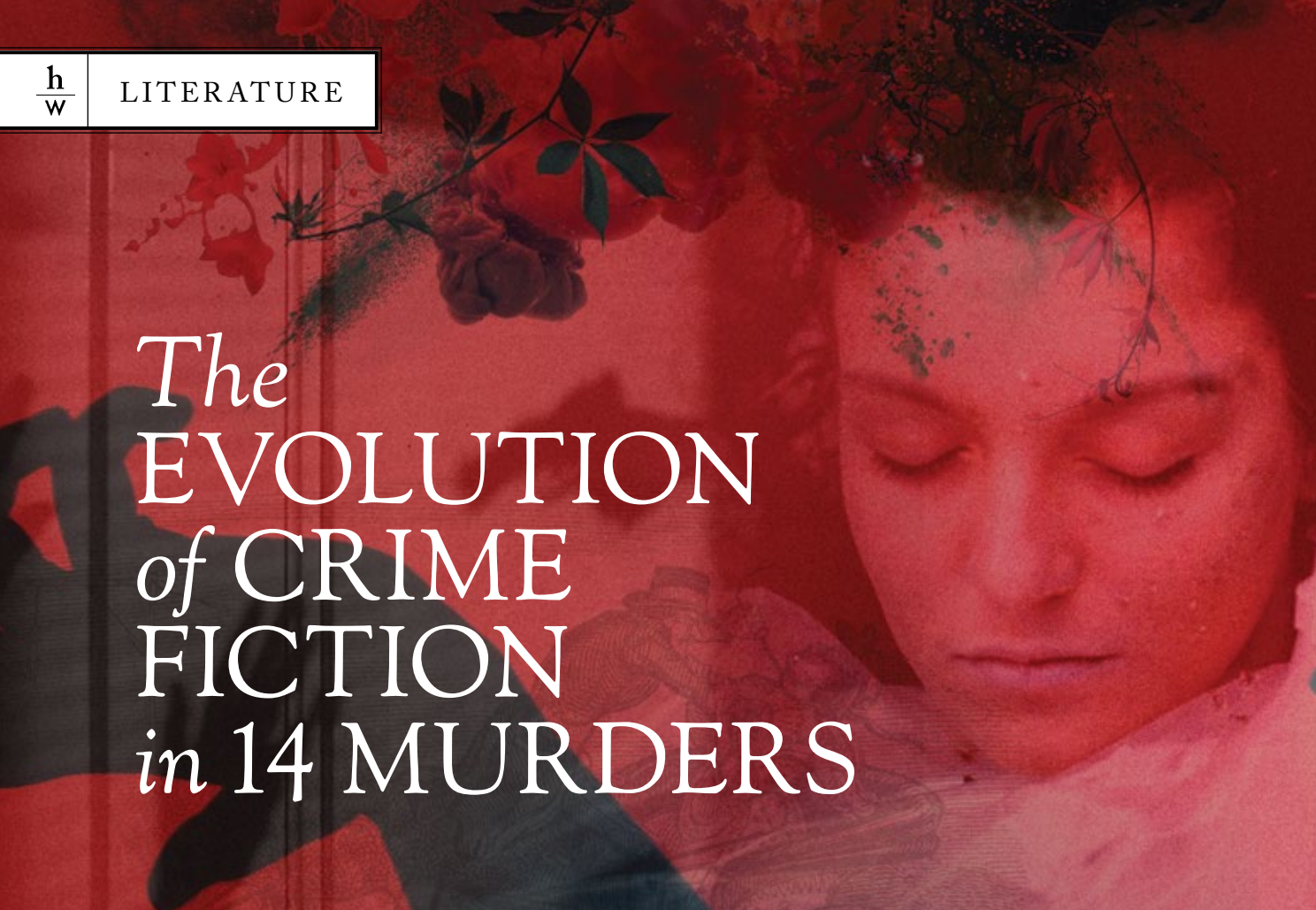
Most of this issue of *Spark* touches on change at some level. Pieces on crime fiction and Northwest hip hop explore how culture changes. Speaker Lori Tsugawa Whaley discusses how the bushido code can change our lives. And *New York Times* bestselling author Jess Walter's short fictional story features a character moving through life *after* a major change (including the strange foggy feeling many of us are feeling as COVID eases its grip on our daily lives).

While change can be challenging, Ralph Waldo Emerson knew it was ultimately a positive force: "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." Our society benefits from change, however difficult it may be. Change improves our lives and the lives of others; if we feel settled with the status quo we are less likely to help improve life for others. As we continue to navigate the rapid pace of change in our era, I hope you can find the strength to help improve society, knowing that the humanities will continue to be a backstop for analysis, reflection, expression, and comfort. That keeps me going, and I hope it will do the same for you, too.



Warmest regards,

Julie Ziegler
Chief Executive Officer
Humanities Washington

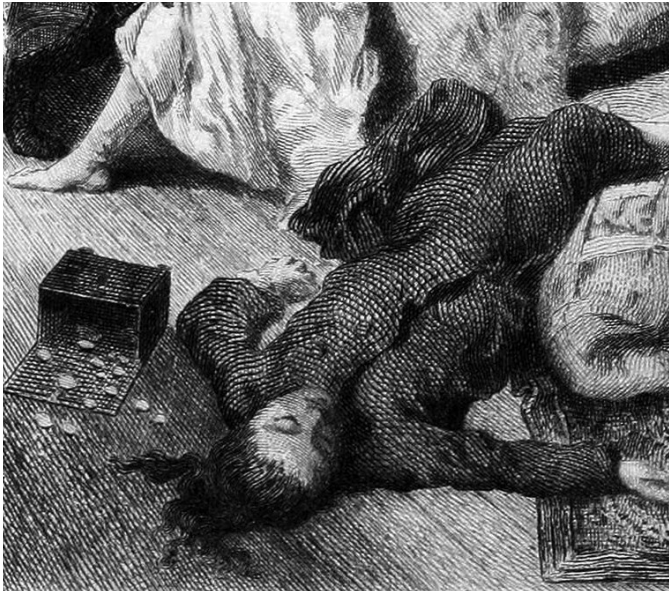


The EVOLUTION *of* CRIME FICTION *in* 14 MURDERS

Has murder gotten...nicer?
Author Matthew Sullivan explores how empathy is
playing a larger role in a genre that has often lacked it.

By Matthew Sullivan

Since the era of Edgar Allen Poe and Agatha Christie, the role of the victim in crime fiction has changed dramatically, a trend that is especially pronounced in today's "literary mysteries." From colorless characters whose main duty was to serve the plot to well-developed human beings with rich inner lives, this shift in the way we see victims compels readers to empathize—to be emotionally invested in the page, and to experience these lost lives in full. Let's get to know fourteen victims, using their unfortunate fates as a lens into how crime fiction has evolved.



MADAME L'ESPANAYE AND HER DAUGHTER, MADEMOISELLE CAMILLE

Where: Fourth floor flat, Rue Morgue, Paris

When: 1841

Method: Straight razor, strangulation, blunt force trauma

The violence committed against these reclusive women is hard to stomach, so it comes as little surprise that these fictional murders were concocted by the Master of the Macabre himself, Edgar Allen Poe, in his story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” In fact, this single short story kick-started the entire detective genre before the word detective was even in use. This is also the first “locked room” mystery: with no way in and no way out, there is no possible way the killer could have committed these crimes. And it is this very insolubility that creates our need for C. Auguste Dupin, the eccentric detective whose life on the margins gives him just the skills

needed to make sense of this madness. In this single story, Poe also establishes the familiar role of the police as bungling, witnesses as myopic and, importantly, the role that the victim will occupy for much of the next 180 years: that of a distant, “colorless” human, whose loss is not to be *felt* by the reader—for that would ruin all the fun.

Readers' emotional response: *Conveniently cold. And the genre begins...*

MILES ARCHER

Where: Bush Street alley, San Francisco, California

When: 1929

Method: Shot right through the pump with a Webley .38 revolver

When Sam Spade learns that his partner, Miles Archer, has been murdered in cold blood while shadowing a femme fatale, Sam slips right into the first two stages of grieving: lighting a smoke and cracking his knuckles. The lies are as thick as the fog in *The Maltese Falcon*, Dashiell Hammett's tale of urban corruption, and characters swap allegiances like vultures swapping bones. Sure, hardboiled dicks have a code they live by, but in the end they're just poor stiffs trying to get by in a rotten world, which means knowing exactly when to stop crackin' foxy and start throwin' blows. Save the bellyaching for choir practice.

Readers' emotional response: *Rest in peace, chump! You shoulda seen it comin'.*





ANTHONY MARSTON

Where: Drawing room, U.N. Owen's estate,
Soldier Island, coastal U.K.

When: 1939

Method: Poison (of course)

Anthony Marston—a remorseless Bright Young Thing who was terribly inconvenienced when he ran over a pair of kids in his roadster—was one of many victims in *And Then There Were None* to feel the wrath of Agatha Christie's vivid imagination. And like a lot of victims in so-called “Cozy” mysteries, Marston deserved every drop of the poison he drank. Unlike poisonings in real life, which are probably pretty icky, Marston *acked* and turned purple, and little birds may have even flown circles over his head. Christie was an ingenious plotter, a master of method and motive, and a genius at duping the reader. But her deaths are positively

clean when compared to, say, reality, and her characters are often accused of being two-dimensional. (The snobbier of her critics have even compared her books to crossword puzzles.... such critics should be careful what they drink.) There's a good reason why Christie has 2 *billion* books in print, but with victims that are often scoundrels, and often under-developed, it's little wonder that readers rarely weep over the body in the library.

Readers' emotional response: *Deeply amused, thoroughly puzzled, but definitely not losing any sleep.*

DICKIE GREENLEAF

Where: Rowboat, Mediterranean Sea, near San Remo, Italy

When: 1955

Method: *Bludgeoned by an oar*

In Tom Ripley, the self-serving antihero readers hate to love in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Patricia Highsmith created a weaselly and witty young man doing all he can—including committing murder—to make his way into the golden circles of the uber-rich. Readers squirm as Ripley pours on the charm and moves from insecure outsider to brutal snake, even going as far as taking on the identity of Dickie, the American socialite pal he murdered. As the plot thickens around him, Tom doubles-down, reassuring Dickie's parents, girlfriend, friends, and police that the murdered young man will soon turn up, and that all will be well again. What a guy! Just don't stand in his way...



Emotional response: *Downright ashamed of ourselves, especially as Ripley comforts the distraught parents of the young man he killed. Psychological suspense at its—worst?*



LAURA PALMER

Where: Abandoned train car, Twin Peaks, Washington

When: 1989

Method: Stabbed

It's easy get lost in the hall of mirrors that is David Lynch and Mark Frost's surreal televised crime series *Twin Peaks*, as it blurs dreams and reality, afterlife and life, even humans and aliens—but one of its core themes comes through clearly, just as it started to in many contemporary mysteries: the ripple effects of crime. From high school hallways to booths at the diner, everyone is impacted by the shockwave of Laura's death.

Viewers' emotional response: *Among the most popular mysteries ever televised, viewers were glued—not just to the loss of Laura's cryptic life, but also to the Log Lady, the backwards-talk, the*

lounge music, the strobe-lit dances, the red velvet and zig-zag floors, and the coffee-and-pie fueled onslaught of ironic Americana. Sterces htiw dellif's'ehs! Let's rock!

SHELLY NORDLING, REBECCA BENNETT, SHARLA MCMICHAEL, JENNIFER SKAGGS, ANDREA JEAN MCCREA, AND RISA

Where: Sprague Avenue, Spokane, Washington

When: 2001

Methods: Gunshot, strangulation

Spokane's own Jess Walter kicked off his career as a novelist with *Over Tumbled Graves*, a kaleidoscopic police procedural that pays homage, in form and theme, to T.S. Eliot's modernist masterpiece, "The Waste Land." It's a jaw-dropping debut that humanizes the characters by using multiple points-of-view, including those of sex-workers, criminals, and of course, philosophical detectives. Unlike a lot of serial killer stories, Walter nods toward the banality of the killer's life and shifts our emotional investment instead toward the lives of the victims, and the messy circumstances that often steered their situations.



Readers' emotional response: *Under Walter's pen, our empathy for these victims is through the roof. The loss of their lives is a human loss, even on the page. By now, a flipside has clearly emerged in the genre: empathy like this kind of hurts. Some of us may begin to wonder whether we're reading for entertainment and escape, or to think and to feel—or all of the above?*

[Editor's note: You can read a (decidedly less murderous) short story from Walter on page 18.]



DEREK JENKINS AND
ISAIAH RANDOLPH

Where: Sidewalk, outside of “a fancy wine store”
in Richmond, Virginia


When: 2021

Method: Multiple gunshots to the head and face

As in his previous crime novel *Blacktop Wasteland*, *Razorblade Tears* sees S.A. Cosby stitch social commentary through the heart of this frantic thriller. We follow a pair of protagonists hellbent on revenge: two aging men—one Black, one white—both surly, flawed and seriously homophobic. When their gay grown sons, married to each other, are murdered on the street, these two bad ass dads form an unlikely bond and take justice into their own hands. With a level of violence that would make Poe proud, they embark on a quest that entangles them

with motorcycle gangs, elitist politicians, and all manner of underworld thugs. More important than the raw battles that ensue are the undercurrents of loss these men feel, and the ways they try to change, despite their age, to accept their sons for who they were.

Readers’ emotional response: *By turns heartbreaking and propulsive, this is another one that conjures our empathy. If these scarred men can grow into acceptance, anyone can.*

The point: In a break from well-established tradition, many contemporary mysteries ask readers to *empathize* as we are entertained. Though this shift toward more empathy may make it harder to read as a means of escape—and even take some of the “fun” out of murder stories—this seems like a hopeful direction, one that heightens our humanity when we step away from the page. 

Matthew Sullivan is a speaker for Humanities Washington’s Speakers Bureau, through which he presents a free talk, “A Nicer Kind of Murder: The Evolution of Crime Fiction.” He is the author of the novel *Midnight at the Bright Ideas Bookstore*, which was an IndieNext pick, a Barnes & Noble Discover pick, and winner of the Colorado Book Award. His essays and stories have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Daily Beast*, *Spokesman-Review*, *Sou’wester*, and elsewhere. He is currently a writing teacher and is working on a crime novel set in Soap Lake.



YOU TOO COULD BE A SAMURAI

After suffering a traumatic brain injury, Lori Tsugawa Whaley credits the ancient bushido code for much of her recovery.

By Jefferson Robbins

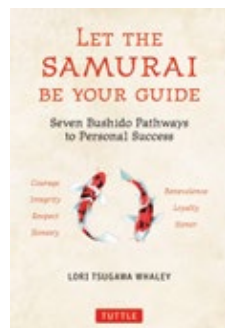
In Lori Tsugawa Whaley's view, a warrior culture can teach us a lot about how to live a peaceful life.

The Gig Harbor speaker is currently giving a talk through Humanities Washington, "The Samurai Code: How Bushido Changes Lives," and is the author of *Let the Samurai Be Your Guide*, a personal-development guide rooted in the code of bushido. That guiding ethos for the Japanese samurai

clans has roots going back more than 1,000 years, and although it developed around matters of war, combat, and struggles for supremacy, Whaley believes it has lessons to share when it comes to issues of family, community, and work.

Whaley, a third-generation Japanese American, holds up modern heroes as exemplars of bushido. See the story of Daniel Inouye, who lost an arm as a U.S. Army platoon leader in World

War II and went on to serve as Senator for Hawai'i. Or the man known as “the Japanese Schindler,” whose diplomatic efforts in Eastern Europe saved an estimated 2,400 Jews from Nazi extermination.



The work that became *Let the Samurai Be Your Guide* helped Whaley out of a dark corner of her life. Injured in a car crash in 2005, she suffered chronic pain, memory loss, and reading challenges that were later traced to traumatic brain injury. The study and effort of researching and writing the book acted as a constructive therapy for the author.

The publishing house that issued Whaley's book in 2020 puts her in good company: Tuttle Publishing has been bringing translated Asian texts and books rooted in Japanese culture to American bookshelves since the late 1940s.

“It's wonderful, and I think it's really a good fit for me and the book,” she says. “Literally, I pinch my cheeks sometimes.”

Humanities Washington: When you were writing *Let the Samurai Be Your Guide*, was there a particular definition of bushido that you worked from? What is bushido for you?

Lori Tsugawa Whaley: *Bushi* is “warrior,” *do* is “the way,” so it's literally “the way of the warrior.” Some people say there are eight key principles, but most people say there are seven. So I went with seven, which is a Japanese number — they like five, seven or ten. These principles include courage, integrity, benevolence, respect, honesty, honor, and loyalty, and the samurai were so dedicated to this code that they were willing to lay down their lives for it. And the ultimate expression of this is seppuku, which is suicide. They had two swords for this, and the shorter one is the personal one, and the longer one is for battle.

These ideas go back a long way, so what kind of meaning or value can bushido carry specifically for Japanese Americans in this century?

It's realizing and recognizing the heritage that we have. I like to say that I turned pain into gain, because growing up in rural America, I was teased and bullied and called names. I hated being Japanese. But then as I grew older, I started thinking about it. I took Japanese in college, because I wanted to know

what my parents were saying. They did not teach us — they would just talk, and we couldn't understand them. I was kind of curious about my culture, but not really delving into it like I did after my accident. All four of my grandparents came from Japan and really wanted to embrace American culture, so they did not encourage their children to learn Japanese. They wanted them to be Americanized. Yet my dad says the first thing he remembers is barbed wire, and being greeted by people on the watchtowers with guns pointing towards him — with guns pointed in, rather than pointed out, to make sure they behaved. I admire that generation of Japanese Americans — both what they went through and their contribution in fighting World War II, so that we could have a better life and wouldn't have to face these kinds of prejudices.

“

*He was everything relating to bushido —
courage, integrity, benevolence.
Sugihara was a samurai warrior,
yet he did not handle a sword.*

”

You were writing and researching this book while you were focusing on your recovery from brain injury. Of these seven elements of bushido, which do you think was most valuable to you in putting things back together?

Courage. I felt that if I could write a book and overcome reading at a seventh-grade level — that was quite an ordeal — then I could overcome traumatic brain injury. And so I finished the book, and that was quite a landmark for me. Courage is facing your fears, and I had a lot of fears to face — finding myself reading at that low level, and also my fear of doctors. I'd really never been to so many medical and therapy appointments in my life as during that period of regaining wellness. I had avoided



▲ Left: Depiction of the revered samurai Miyamoto Musashi. Illustration courtesy of Wikicommons. Right: Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara. Photo courtesy of Wikicommons.


doctors like the plague. But I had to rely on them, because I couldn't do it myself.

Your book also features Japanese Americans who you hold up as representing a bushido principle. Who's your favorite among the people you chose?

I'd have to say Chiune Sugihara, the diplomat to Lithuania for Japan (1939-40). Against the orders of the Japanese, he wrote visas to save the lives of Jewish people. He had nothing to gain, and he knew that it could mean his life or imprisonment, which it did — he was imprisoned for 18 months with his family, and then blacklisted. He always stood for what was right. He was everything relating to bushido — courage, integrity, benevolence. Sugihara was a samurai warrior, yet he did not handle a sword.

For you, this has been a journey of reclamation. But sometimes people with European heritage, like myself, will gravitate toward ideas that come from Asian countries. So does it give you pause when you see a person of my heritage

glomming onto these ideas? Or are you happy to spread these ideals as far as you can?

That's one of my major goals: to share about the code of bushido. Because I believe in this day and age, people are looking for leaders, and unless one can lead themselves, they can't lead others. What better moral framework to have? Because I believe in this day and age, people are looking for leaders, and until you can lead yourself, you can't lead others. I share about the code of bushido because a person can adopt one principle, or all of it. And it's not just for the Japanese. Good ethics never go out of style — that's my philosophy. 

Jefferson Robbins is a reporter and local television producer in central Washington. He has written for newspapers, magazines, and blogs for the last thirty years, with an emphasis on film and culture.



HOW *the* NORTHWEST SHOCKED *the* HIP-HOP WORLD

*Sir Mix-A-Lot, NastyMix records,
and the moment Seattle defied all the odds.*

By **Daudi Abe**

Best known nationally for software, coffee, and grunge, Seattle may seem an unlikely place for a thriving hip-hop scene, with artists like Sir Mix-A-Lot and Macklemore viewed by the mainstream as “surprising” success stories. One recent jab from a cable music channel drives this bias home: while the 2012 song “Same Love” by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, featuring Mary Lambert, played on the channel *Hit List*, the following graphic appeared:

DID YOU KNOW?

Macklemore grew up in the spoken word community due to Seattle’s barely-there hip-hop scene.

These dismissive attitudes from outside sources about hip hop in Seattle are almost as old as hip hop itself. This perception persisted, despite the fact that nationally and internationally recognized figures from various aspects of the local hip-hop scene have emerged from the Northwest Coast over the course of nearly forty years. It's a bias that dates back to when New York City was still the center of the hip-hop universe, and serious doubts were cast on the legitimacy of nearly all material that came from elsewhere.

Then in the late 1980s an independent rap label, based in Seattle of all places, released two platinum albums and shocked the hip-hop world. Those albums were by Sir Mix-A-Lot. His story and that of the label NastyMix, founded by Mix-A-Lot, Nasty Nes, Ed Locke, and Greg Jones, speak to the unique nature of Seattle hip-hop—its willingness to go against current trends, its DIY attitude, its defiance of any particular sonic aesthetic, and its emphasis on community.

FIRST IN THE WEST

As it had in New York, radio played an early and crucial role in building a community around hip hop in Seattle. Without a doubt, the first person most responsible for this dynamic locally was “Nasty” Nes Rodriguez, who had arrived in the United States from the Philippines in 1970. By 1980, Rodriguez became the host of a Sunday night show on Seattle’s KFOX called *FreshTracks*. Initially the format of the show was to spotlight new music, primarily rhythm and blues or rap. However, the number of requests for rap songs began to dominate all others, and by 1981 *FreshTracks* became the first rap radio show west of the Mississippi River.

From the beginning, *FreshTracks* was a game changer. Live mixing and scratching on two turntables was completely new to Seattle radio. This foreign sound of Nasty Nes “in the mix” along with the rapid rise in popularity of hip hop created a diverse cross-section of listeners. Nes introduced his “Mastermix,” a thirty-minute nonstop blend of popular songs. While based primarily in rap, these mastermixes followed in the footsteps of Afrika Bambaataa and pulled music from an eclectic variety of genres and artists, including Kraftwerk, Hall and Oates, and Los Angeles-based Egyptian Lover.

In 1984, Nasty Nes heard about a series of parties being held at the Boys & Girls Club in the Central District and went to

investigate. Every weekend, someone who called himself Sir Mix-A-Lot was packing the gym, and for a dollar per person he gave the crowd a complete one-man show. Mix-A-Lot, who could cut, mix, and scratch records as well as rap, commanded the crowd. Thoroughly impressed by what he saw, Nes invited Mix-A-Lot onto KFOX to air his music. Sir Mix-A-Lot became the most popular artist on KFOX, receiving more phone-in requests than even Michael Jackson and Prince.

“

Whereas New York hip hop, for example, had traditionally been associated with Roland 808 drum machines, and California hip hop relied heavily on synthesized and funk-based samples, no dominant style ever took hold in Seattle.

”

“NO STREET FEEL”

A Seattle native, Anthony “Sir Mix-A-Lot” Ray, grew up in the Bryant Manor Apartments on East Yesler Way in the Central District. He graduated from Roosevelt High School in 1981 without any formal musical training but had an ear and a passion for music. He also possessed a knack for working with machines and systems. This led Mix-A-Lot to begin experimenting and creating music with machines like the Roland 808 drum machine, Korg and Moog synthesizers, and a Commodore 64 computer.

From the start, Sir Mix-A-Lot’s material was completely self-composed and arranged. Mix-A-Lot drew inspiration from the Emerald Street Boys, the first hip-hop performers in town to draw extended attention in the local media. By 1983 he was making songs and DJing on weekends at the Rainier Vista Boys & Girls Club in South Seattle. Word-of-mouth spread throughout the CD about these parties, and while Mix-A-Lot



▲ Swass, Mack Daddy, and Chief Boot Knocka album covers.

was busy setting up his equipment inside the gymnasium, hordes of excited young people gathered for impromptu preshow breaking and rap battles.

Quoted in *The Rocket* in 1985, Mix-A-Lot said, “I come up with stuff as good, from a musician’s standpoint, as anything by [New York producer] Hashim or Dr. Dre, and I do it right here in this room.” However, in the already competitive world of hip hop there were inevitable critics of what local music writer Glen Boyd described as Mix-A-Lot’s “funk technology.” Portland, Oregon artist Chris “Vitamix” Blanchard complained: “The West Coast Sound sucks. There’s no street feel to it anymore, just all these synthesizers. Well anyone can spend \$4,000 on synthesizers and be the best DJ in town. But where’s the talent? I’m for rawness, this is supposed to be street music.”

Mix-A-Lot’s critique of the local scene was different. Responding to a comment in *Billboard* magazine, which sarcastically referred to his hometown as “that hip-hop hotbed Seattle,” Mix-A-Lot’s said the issue with the scene was that few people from Seattle believed in Seattle. He even cited local rappers who got onstage and claimed to be from the Bronx.

SEATTLE, NAME-CHECKED

Within a year of its release, Sir Mix-A-Lot’s 1985 independent EP *Square Dance Rap* had sold more than forty-five thousand copies. As his popularity grew, Nasty Nes and Mix-A-Lot

considered the idea of creating their own record label. Using a combination of Nes and Mix-A-Lot’s names, NastyMix Records was founded in 1985 along with partners Ed Locke and Greg Jones. His follow-up EP, *I’m A Trip* (1986), was released on the newly formed NastyMix record label.

Mix-A-Lot’s ability to produce material was matched by his willingness to pay dues. From the beginning, he had relentlessly sold tapes from the trunk of his car until record stores like Music Menu heard the street buzz and began carrying his music. But tension between Mix-A-Lot and other Seattle rap artists had become apparent. *I’m A Trip* was a reference to his feeling that he was being misjudged locally. “It’s all a big lie. People say ‘you got a big Cadillac, you’re trippin. You think you’re this, you’re trippin.’ So I just tripped through a whole song bragging on everything I have, which ain’t much. I gave the people what they always wanted.”

Sir Mix-A-Lot’s steady buildup had him well positioned for a breakout hit. Originally released in 1987, “Posse on Broadway,” with vocals partly inspired by the song “Paul Revere” by the Beastie Boys, stood out in several ways. One was by name-checking specific streets and landmarks such as Rainier Avenue, the intersection of Twenty-third Avenue and Union Street, Seattle Central Community College, and Dick’s Drive-In. In the same way that KRS-One of the legendary New York group Boogie Down Productions described his home in the 1986 song “South Bronx,” “Posse on Broadway” sent messages

about Seattle culture to the rest of the world in a way that had never been done before.

In “Posse on Broadway,” Mix-A-Lot acknowledged the diversity of his crew by mentioning his white real estate investor friend Larry, he spoke out against disrespect of women, and he described using mace on a man who was about to physically assault his girlfriend. This approach was in stark contrast to the likes of Niggaz Wit Attitude (NWA), who represented the swiftly emerging strain of hip hop known as “gangsta” rap. The only white people referenced in NWA’s music were the Los Angeles Police Department officers they hated. Conflicts in an NWA song always ended with a shotgun or an AK-47, and women were referred to as “bitches” or “hos” more than anything else.

The video for “Posse on Broadway,” featuring Mix-A-Lot riding around in a black Mercedes Benz limousine, showcased various parts of Seattle’s South End, Central District, and Capitol Hill neighborhoods. Mix-A-Lot’s mention of Dick’s Drive-In, a Seattle fast food institution since 1954, created massive free publicity for the local burger chain wherever the song traveled. However, the owners refused to let NastyMix Records shoot any portion of the “Posse on Broadway” video at the Dick’s Broadway location. Instead, the scenes were shot at Stan’s, another drive-in burger restaurant located a few miles south of Dick’s at the intersection of Rainier Avenue and Dearborn Street. Twenty years later, Mix-A-Lot returned to Dick’s in an orange Lamborghini while making a cameo appearance in Jake One’s “Home” video, Macklemore shot the video for his song “White Walls” standing on the roof of the building, and the owner personally apologized to Mix-A-Lot for the original snub.



▲ Dick’s Drive-In refused to be a part of the original ‘Posse on Broadway’ video. They later apologized. Photo by Joe Mabel.

SLOW AND STEADY

“Posse on Broadway” experienced wide success as the single entered the national charts and the video appeared on MTV. This set the stage for the release of Sir Mix-A-Lot’s debut LP *Swass* in 1988. The tone of the album radiated a unique vibe, as Mickey Hess noted in his book *Hip-Hop in America: A Regional Guide*. “*Swass* was extremely innovative and set Mix-A-Lot apart from many of his peers in rap music at the time,” Hess wrote. “His rap in this album focused more on middle-class issues, using humor as an outlet, rather than depending on rage at a system or descriptions of life in the projects.” Although Seattle certainly had its fair share of issues between law enforcement and the African American community, which Mix-A-Lot addressed in the song “Hip-Hop Soldier,” for the most part *Swass* was about “having the most money and gold, getting the best women, and being the best rapper in the game.”

“

Mix-A-Lot reversed field on the rising popularity of super-macho West Coast “gangsta” rap by calling out domestic violence in his reference to using mace to defend a woman from her abusive boyfriend.

”

Within a year of its release, *Swass* had entered both Billboard’s Black and Pop LP charts and sold more than five hundred thousand copies, making it the biggest-selling record released by an independent Seattle-based label in years. Despite this, *The Rocket* noted in January 1989, “Sir Mix-A-Lot would have a tough time finding a gig here [in Seattle]. Yet in cities like Miami, Houston, Phoenix, and Detroit, Mix has sold-out crowds wanting to know more about the ‘Seattle hip-hop sound.’” *Swass*’s buildup was slow and steady—it took more than a year for the record to go platinum.

With two platinum-selling Sir Mix-A-Lot albums, things appeared to be going well at NastyMix Records in the late 1980s and early 90s. However, as was common among hip-hop artists in the early days, Mix-A-Lot was largely unfamiliar with the record business. Further, Mix-A-Lot was unhappy with the promotion of his second album, *Seminar*, which marked the end of his contract with NastyMix Records. Following a dispute over publishing monies owed to him, an Atlanta-based rap and blues label became Nasty Mix's primary stockholder. The eventual closure of NastyMix Records in 1992 represented the end of an era. According to the *Seattle Times*, "NastyMix put Seattle on the rap map and contributed to the city's image as a hot-bed of new, young music talent." Despite how it ended, NastyMix helped provide a blueprint of how to build a successful, minority-owned rap label outside New York that put out local music with global reach.

A WINDOW BEING OPENED IN A STUFFY ROOM

Not long after, iconic hip-hop label founder Rick Rubin offered Mix-A-Lot the chance to operate his own label, Rhyme Cartel Records. The first release on the label was Sir Mix-A-Lot's third album, 1992's *Mack Daddy*. In addition to investing \$1 million in his new signing, Rubin had a marketing vision for Mix-A-Lot: "If you're gonna be a gangster, you'd be the boss." The look, complete with fur coats and cigars, was of a pimp who drives a Porsche, a rapper who was "too legit to give a shit."

The initial single from *Mack Daddy*, "One Time's Got No Case," focused on police use of racial profiling in deciding which drivers to pull over. The single sold fifty thousand copies and set the stage for the album's second single "Baby Got Back." When "Baby Got Back" was released in the spring of 1992, the response was immediate and not all enthusiastic. Because of its suggestive nature, MTV banned the video for "Baby Got Back." MTV had done this in the past—for example, refusing to broadcast the NWA video "Straight Outta Compton" in 1988 amid claims that the song promoted violence. MTV eventually agreed to air "Baby Got Back" but only at night. Just as it had in the case of NWA, the controversy simply made "Baby Got Back" more popular. The song spent five weeks at number one on the Billboard pop chart, making Mix-A-Lot the first Northwest artist to reach the top spot since Heart's "Alone" in 1987. The song was certified double platinum (two million copies sold).

Writer and editor Charles Mudede argued that Sir Mix-A-Lot's success "caught everyone by surprise because (1) Seattle was completely off the hip-hop radar, and (2) there was nothing in the main-stream that sounded remotely like his music." Sir Mix-A-Lot rapped only like Sir Mix-A-Lot, but, most important, "Sir Mix-A-Lot wasn't so fucking serious." "Baby Got Back," which opened with a conversation between two white girls disgusted by a Black woman's huge butt, "returned laughter to the hip-hop charts and the dance floor. The record felt like a window being opened in a stuffy room." KEXP DJ Riz Rollins added: "This was Seattle's big gift to black America. People remembered it was good to have fun now and then. And it could only happen in Seattle because we were so isolated. We were free to do whatever we wanted."

"Baby Got Back" was based on Mix-A-Lot's critique of traditional Eurocentric beauty standards and body shape. As he told *Entertainment Weekly*, "I'm sorry, but the popular image of a beautiful woman today is a bean pole. A lot of women, white and black, have thanked me for 'Baby Got Back.'" Controversy hovered as the song was labeled racist and sexist, and several Mix-A-Lot shows were picketed by protesters that accused him of exploitation by disparaging one group of women to build up another. When the nominations for the Thirty-fifth Annual Grammy Awards were announced on January 7, 1993, Seattle hip hop had truly arrived on the world stage. In the category for Best Solo Rap Performance, "Baby Got Back" faced superstar competition—"Addam's Groove" by MC Hammer, "Strictly Business" by LL Cool J, "You Gotta Believe" by Mark "Marky Mark" Wahlberg, and "Latifah's Had It Up 2 Here" by Queen Latifah. The announcement of Mix-A-Lot as the winner and presentation of his trophy was not seen on television as the Grammys had not yet made the decision to include the rap awards as part of the regular broadcast.

When his 1994 album *Chief Boot Knocka* was released, he again pushed the envelope with another risqué music video. In addition to this new album following up on the themes explored on *Mack Daddy*, "like that record it comes with plenty of pre-release controversy. The first single, 'Put 'Em On da Glass,' features an X-rated video that's so explicit even his publicist says she hasn't seen it and doesn't want to," wrote journalist Scott Griggs in *The Rocket*. Mix-A-Lot's 1996 album *Return of the Bumpasaurus* went essentially unnoticed by the mainstream. *The Rocket* reported Mix-A-Lot's success had created tension

with some elements in the Central District: “Without going incognito, the man can’t go back in the neighborhood he grew up in without a death threat. Please, he didn’t kill anyone so what’s the problem?”

Two factors potentially contributed to this strained relationship—one was the natural tension that occurs as an artist makes the transition from local to national/global, and the other was the ultra-competitive nature of hip-hop culture, which does not always celebrate the success of others without expecting said success to be spread around the scene.


UNCATEGORIZED

It would take over a decade before another Seattle hip-hop artist would break out internationally, when Macklemore released “Thrift Shop.” In addition to a do-it-yourself ethos, both Mix-A-Lot and Macklemore shared a willingness to musically go against the grain of their respective eras. In his breakout hit “Posse on Broadway,” Mix-A-Lot reversed field on the rising popularity of super-macho West Coast “gangsta” rap by calling out domestic violence in his reference to using mace to defend a woman from her abusive boyfriend. Similarly, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis’s songs “Thrift Shop” and “Same Love” countered two of hip hop’s most popular and oldest norms: bling (the celebration of expensive jewelry and name-brand clothing) and homophobia.

In addition to its lyrical diversity, the unique nature of hip hop from Seattle has continued to defy any particular label or sonic aesthetic. Whereas New York hip hop, for example, had traditionally been associated with Roland 808 drum machines, and California hip hop relied heavily on synthesized and funk-based samples, no dominant style ever took hold in Seattle. It has long been maintained there is no specific way to categorize Seattle hip hop. This is in stark contrast to the grunge rock movement of the 1990s, which initially was known as the “Seattle sound.”

Legendary New York MC KRS-One once stated that hip hop was less about race and ethnicity, and more about skill, ideology, and authenticity. Past examples of racial diversity in hip hop included Puerto Rican contributions to the development of break dancing and the acceptance of white rap groups in the late 1980s and early 1990s such as the Beastie Boys and 3rd Bass in New York City as well as Latino artists

like Kid Frost and Cypress Hill in Los Angeles. Potentially complex interactions between diverse groups of people could be simplified with hip hop functioning as a common point of cultural interest.

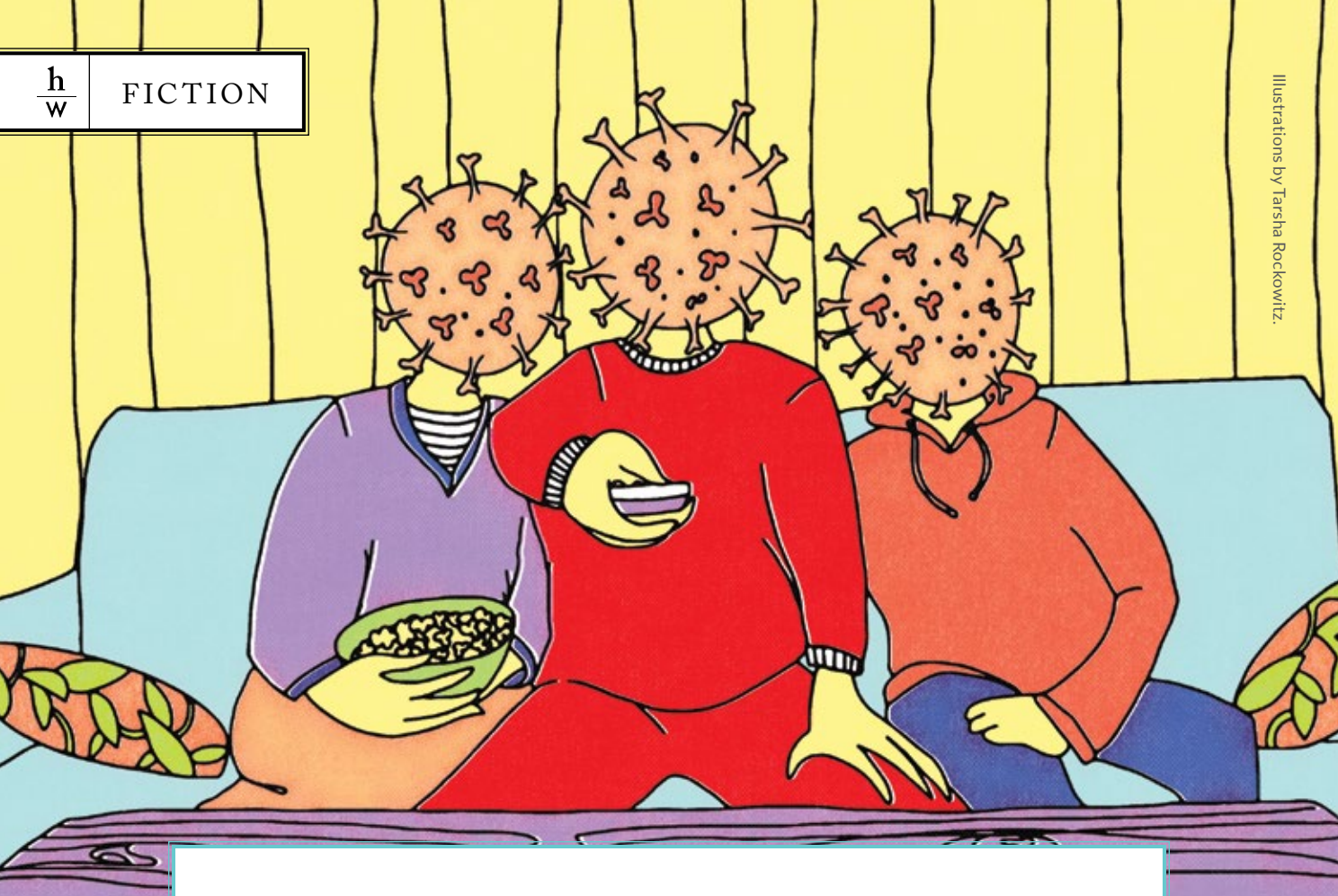
It could be argued that Seattle is one of the more inclusive environments in all of hip hop. This multiracial dynamic was demonstrated early on in Seattle’s local scene, with the seminal meeting of Filipino DJ “Nasty” Nes Rodriguez and a young Sir Mix-A-Lot at the Rotary Boys & Girls Club in the Central District. 

Daudi Abe is a professor, writer, historian, and the author of *Emerald Street: A History of Hip-hop in Seattle*, from which this article was adapted by permission of UW Press. Abe is also the author of the book *6 'N the Morning: West Coast Hip-Hop Music 1987-1992 & the Transformation of Mainstream Culture* and *From Memphis and Mogadishu: The History of African Americans in Martin Luther King County, Washington, 1858-2014* at BlackPast.org.



EXPLORE MORE ABOUT HIP HOP

Around the state and online, join artist, activist, and Speakers Bureau presenter King Khazm for a free talk exploring the art, history, philosophy, and ethics of hip hop. Hip-hop culture and its founding principles are often misunderstood due to its commodification and exploitation by corporate interests and mainstream media. Few know its humble roots as a tool to unify, uplift, and amplify voices, particularly for youth of color. Check out our calendar at humanities.org to find an event near you.



RETURN TO AFOREMENTIONED ISLAND

A short story by Jess Walter

And then it was over.

We began seeing airplanes in the sky again, and cars on the road. Restaurants re-opened, and on TV, the stadiums were filled with people. We were told that our son could return to middle school. That my wife and I could go back to work.

That weekend, I shaved my beard and shed the sweatpants that I'd been wearing for months. Sunday night, we ate a last dinner together, just the three of us: my moody 13-year-old son, Dean, my wife Rena, and me. We were uneasy, the clank of forks the only noise in our dining room. At one point, my wife and I made eye contact and she raised her brows. That night, while Rena and Dean stared into their phones, I went upstairs

and stood in front of the mirror, practiced shaking hands and pushing elevator buttons. I rehearsed holding a cup of coffee and laughing at my co-workers' jokes. "Hilarious, Dave."

Monday morning, I showered, dressed, and found myself back in front of that same full-length mirror, the ends of a red checked necktie draped down either side of my crisp white dress shirt. And then: a moment of disconnection, panic. Was the fat end or the skinny end supposed to be longer? It was such a tiny thing—I could simply try one, then the other, until I figured it out—a fifty-fifty chance! But as I stood there, staring at my necktie, my heart began racing. What if I never remembered?

I began to wonder if this wasn't something else, a deeper reticence. Fear, even. I hated to admit it but I hadn't entirely minded social distancing, quarantine. The easing of social pressure. It was nice to not have to see in-laws. And the obligations! Come to *this charity auction*, come to *that community meeting*, you're late for *this*, you forgot *that*. Christmas at my parents' house? Sorry, not safe. Our niece's wedding? We can't possibly fly to Houston. If I was being honest, I had *liked* staying home for almost two years. If I was *really* being honest, I was kind of *repelled* by my fellow humans, by their demands and politics, their fits and phobias, biases and germs. I didn't want to return to all of that.

I sensed it in Rena, too, this unease about our imminent return to the outside world. We'd grown used to solitude. We'd lived on an island, an island with take-out and Netflix and family game night and a wine club that delivered Syrah by the case. The case!

And what happened when people were rescued from islands? They had trouble adjusting to civilization, that's what. I recalled a movie where Tom Hanks was rescued from a desert island and didn't like to wear shoes afterward.

I was looking down at my own uncomfortable shoes when Dean came in, wearing his school uniform: khakis with a blue polo.

He looked me in the eye. "So we're doing this," he said. "Just ... pretending it's over."

"Apparently," I said.

"You do know that these things don't just end because we want them to," Dean said. "There are viral mutations, waves of

conspiracy, civil unrest—this is not over. In 180 A.D., they believed the Antonine Plague had ended, only to have Marcus Aurelius fall sick, his horrible death bringing about an end to the Golden Age of Rome."

I showed him the two sides of my tie. "You don't happen to remember—"

"Loop it around your neck," he said, "and hang it from the rafters."

I looked up. We didn't have rafters.

Dean grabbed my arm, an unhinged look in his eyes. "Listen," he hissed. "I can't do this. I can't do P.E.! It's medieval! Take off your clothes and put on these other clothes, and, for fifty minutes let the strong ones *beat* on the weak ones? Who thought of this? It's barbarism!"

I searched my memory. There was something I used to say in moments like this, before—as the father, the head of house, the *pater familias*, something ... reassuring.

Then, like a vision, it came to me.

"Do your best," I said.

"Dear God!" Dean turned and stumbled from the room. I could hear him down the hall. "This is madness!"

A moment later, my wife came in, wearing a floor-length organza gown with a string of pearls around her neck.

"This isn't right, is it?" she said.

"Oh no, I don't think so," I said. "Where'd you get it?"

She pointed to the corner of our bedroom, and said, quietly, with wonder. "Did you know there's another, smaller room adjacent to our bedroom."



"Yes," I said, "the closet." It was where I had found the necktie. And the shiny, uncomfortable shoes. Pants with creases down the legs.

"It's filled with things like this," my wife said. "There's a coat in there ..." She bent in and whispered: "I think it might be made from the skin of an animal."

"Well, I wouldn't wear that either," I said. "There must be something suitable in there."

"I guess," she said, but then she looked from the closet to me, a low-grade terror rising in her eyes. "But Randall ... I ... I can't remember. What is it we do?"

"Do?"

"For a living. After I put on the proper clothing ... where do I go? What do I do?"

Her insecurity was endearing. I don't think I've ever felt more affection for my wife than I did just then. I remembered the pretty girl that I had met back in ... well, at the ... uh ... you know, it wasn't important where we'd met. I had met her somewhere. That much was clear.

All I could do now was exude the preternatural calm that I suspected defined me before all of this, as the *pater familias*, father, male, alpha. This was my role, one might say. We all have roles. I said as much to Rena. "We all have roles. The economy is a complex web of production, automation and labor, and required therein is a professional management class of highly trained ... um ..."

She was staring at me. I cleared my throat, bent over, and grabbed the brown briefcase at my feet. I held it out for her to see. "I go places," I said, "with this."

"Yes!" Relief showed on her face. "You do!" she said. "I remember!" She ran a hand across the smooth leather of the case. Then she said, "What's in it?"

"Oh." I held the case out and we both stared at it. "Well. I suspect certain items of commerce, various ... *accoutrement* of a man of my ... station."

"Ah." She smiled at my sense of calm and fingered the pearls around her neck. "And what about me? What do I do?"

"You? Well. You, uh ..."

Thankfully Dean came back in then. "In 429 BC, Pericles lost both his sons to the plague," he said. "They were the heirs to the throne and while Spartans besieged his beloved city-state, Pericles died in unspeakable anguish, pustules bursting, servants wailing in agony at his tortured cries, a horror that even his great wealth and power could not abate, as he coughed up blood and cursed his very birth—his death also the death of Athens, the death of democracy itself, setting civilization back hundreds of years." Dean pointed at me, like some ancient prophet of doom. "Do I have to take hot lunch?"

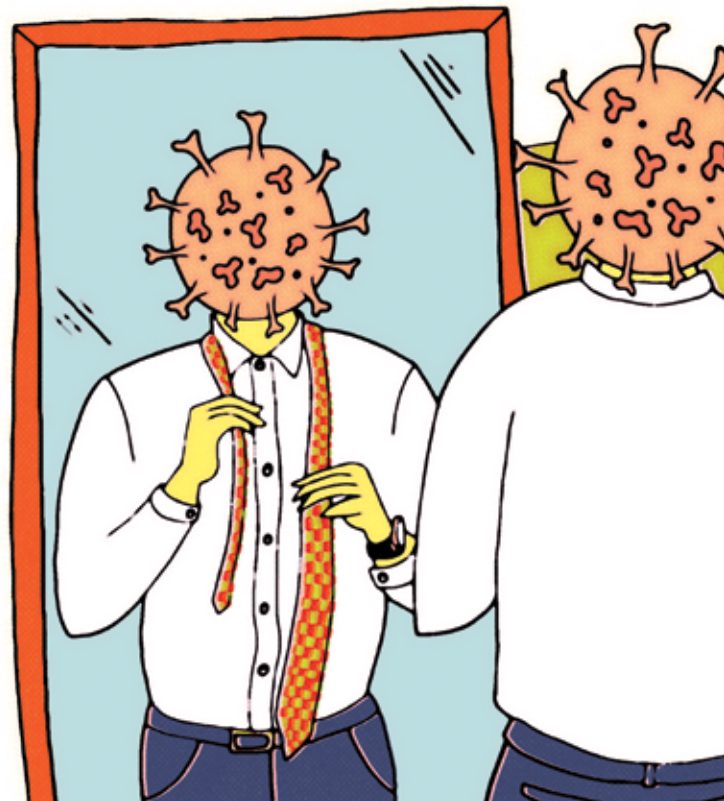
"Yes," I said.

"Aaaah!" he yelled. "I hate pizza rolls! This is lunacy!"

"Do your best," I said.

"Dean," Rena reached for our son's arm. "What ... do I do?"

I was happy to be off the hook. It can be exhausting, being the *pater familias*, especially when you're not entirely sure what that means. So I was glad to have his help. "Yes," I said. "Answer your mother. What does she do?"



He sighed. “She demands so much from me that I can never fully satisfy her unreasonable expectations, and then, when I let her down, which I inevitably do, she forgives me so unconditionally, with such selfless, infantilizing love, that the only disappointment left is that which I have for myself—a condition of self-loathing so paralyzing it means I might never grow into a fully functional adult human being.”

It was quiet in the room.

“You’re a speech therapist,” Dean said finally.

“There you go!” I said to my wife. “You gives speeches and people find it therapeutic!”

“That’s not what that is,” Dean said.

“Then do your best,” I said to Rena.

“God help us,” Dean said, and he left the room.

My wife and I were quiet then. Me with the two ends of my tie, Alayna fiddling with her pearls as—

“Wait,” she said, “I thought my name was Rena.”

“What?”

“Just now, you thought, Alayna fiddling with her pearls. But earlier, you called me Rena.”

“Well,” I said, “let’s not get hung up on ... there are many ... the economy is complex web of—”

“It’s fine.” She waved me off, exhausted. “Alayna is nice, too.” She held out a pair of clip-on earrings. “But what do I do with these?”

“Those?” I took them from her, pinched the two sides of my tie and used the earrings to clip them together. “See,” I said, “it’s fine, darling. We can *do* this.”

“But Jared—” she said.

I looked around the empty room. Apparently, she meant me. “Yes?”

She fingered the small end of my tie. “I’m frightened.”

I looked up. Still no rafters in the ceiling. “Me too,” I admitted.

And when I looked down again, Dean was back in our room. He shook his head and walked up to me. He took the earrings off my tie and gently clipped them onto my wife’s lobes. “I suppose if we’re going to do this,” he said, “we should try not to look totally insane.” He walked past us and into the closet. My wife and I exchanged a worried glance. But after a moment, our son emerged again with a midnight blue skirt, a white short sleeve blouse and black sandals. “Try this,” he said to my wife, and pointed her toward the bathroom.

Then he turned his attention to me. He seemed different, somehow, older than when this had all started. He grabbed the two ends of my tie. “Relax,” he said. He pulled the wide end, wrapped it and crossed it over the skinny end, then brought it down through the loop he’d made. “See, not so different than tying shoelaces,” he said, and I was about to ask where he’d learned such a thing when I had a distant memory of having it taught to him myself.

He snugged the knotted tie up against my throat. Then patted my chest. He bent down and opened my brief case, held it up for me to see. “Nothing to be afraid of,” he said.

So I bent down and looked inside. There was a stack of brochures and documents, a blur of numbers and pie charts. I looked up in confusion.

“You work in finance,” Dean said, with something less than pride. “You sell shares of a fund that buys distressed real estate—suburban tracts, mini-malls, old trailer courts—and transforms those assets into arcane, destructive financial instruments that spread ownership among various other funds and banks, generating massive wealth for your clients while guaranteeing the poor will never own their own homes.”

“Oh,” I said. “I’m not sure I understood that.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” he said, “nobody does.”

My wife came out then, in the blouse and skirt.

“You look beautiful—” I looked at Dean.

“—Rena,” he said.

“Renal!” I said.

A smile came over her face then. She took my hand. “Thank you, Jared!”

“Randall,” said Dean.

“Randall!” said Rena, and it all came flooding back. I’d met her at our Beach Club! We were introduced by my old college roommate! We were the Mortons, Randall and Rena. We had a second home! In the San Juans!

“We have a second home,” I said, and Rena called back, “In the San Juans!” and we embraced. When we separated, I saw that Dean was holding a note.

“I will help you,” Dean said, “in exchange for this.” The note was written in block letters. It excused him from playing something called “big ball soccer” in his P.E. class, because of his asthma.

“You have asthma?” I said. “Is it serious?”

He shrugged. I signed the note and handed it back to him.

“You guys can do this,” Dean said. “Listen. In the fourteenth century, the black plague, the worst pandemic in human history, swept through Europe, killing half the population and reducing humankind to levels of poverty and sorrow not seen in a thousand years. But do you know what immediately followed immediately that?”

“Dinner?” Rena said.



“The Renaissance,” Dean said. “Because it proved unable to stop the plague, the church’s hold on people was broken, and an unprecedented explosion of science followed—of medicine, astronomy, philosophy and art, a big bang of knowledge, the fruits of which we continue to bear, in music and physics and literature, a flowering of the very *best* of humanity—democracy and peace and

fairness, too, the very idea of human rights! Perhaps we, too, can emerge from this dark age of superstition and ignorance in which we have been living the last few years, and recommit ourselves to a better, fairer, more sustainable world.”

Rena and I stared at him. I can’t overstate the pride I felt then. The love. The profound mystery of parenting—to have created such a being—I nearly wept.

I turned to Rena. “He’s right,” I said.

“Yes, we can do this,” she said. We embraced again.

I grabbed my car keys. “I’ll drive!” I said. “I’ll drop you off at the speech therapy factory.”

“Clinic,” said Dean.

“Clinic!” I said, “and then I’ll go to the—”

“Office,” Dean said.

“Office!” I said.

Rena and I started for the door.


“Your shoes are on the wrong feet,” Dean said. “All four of them.”

But we couldn’t wait. Dean had taken us this far, but Rena and I had to do the rest. To venture back into a world rife with dark-age misinformation and fear, to battle for rationality and compassion. To fight for a world worthy of our child.

I was at the door when Dean called out to me. “Hey Dad.”

I turned.

“Open the garage door before you back the car out.”

I pointed, clicked my tongue and winked. “I’ll do my best,” I said. 

Jess Walter is the *New York Times*-bestselling author of, most recently, *The Cold Millions*, as well as numerous other books including *Beautiful Ruins*, *We Live in Water*, and *Citizen Vince*. This story was written for Humanities Washington’s 2021 Bedtime Stories fundraising event, in which Northwest authors write and read original work based on the event’s theme.



IT'S NEVER BEEN EASIER TO SUPPORT HUMANITIES WASHINGTON.

Give monthly by becoming a Humanities Sustainer today. You'll help ensure that Humanities Washington continues to provide free programming statewide.

To join, simply set up a monthly recurring payment online at humanities.org.

WHY JOIN?

IT'S CONVENIENT.

Automatic deduction from your bank or payment via your credit card means no reminders to renew. Simply call our office to change or suspend contributions.

IT'S POWERFUL.

Monthly contributions add up! By spreading your pledge over 12 months, you will be able to make a larger impact than a single gift can accomplish.

IT'S ENDURING.

Streamlined administration means more of your contribution can be used for long-term programming, strengthening communities across the state.



▲ Rena Priest. Photo by Erika Shultz/*The Seattle Times*.

“I THINK I NEED TO COME HOME”

An interview with Rena Priest, new Washington State Poet Laureate, about the meaning of home and the music of language.

By Samantha Allen

Rena Priest writes poetry that is as personal in its perspective as it is planetary. Her first poem, written in the second grade, was about sunsets and bees. A more recent work, “The Index,” imagines a ledger recording the deeds of every earthly creature, humans especially, on the brink of environmental collapse. To read her words is to care deeply about the ground they were written on.

A member of the Lhaq’temish (Lummi) Nation, Priest is the first Washington State Poet Laureate from a tribal community. For her, the appointment is a confirmation and culmination of her decision to come home to Bellingham after graduating with an M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence College in 2008. Shortly after she returned to Washington with a veritable mountain of student debt on her back, an elder at a community gathering told her, “Now, that you’ve come home, you have to help your people,” to which the young poet asked, “How?”

“Think good things about them,” the elder urged.

That piece of advice has been the through-line of Priest’s poetry career, likewise her simultaneous work as a job skills instructor for the Lummi Indian Business Council and in her environmental advocacy on behalf of the Salish Sea. In 2017, she published *Patriarchy Blues*, a searing collection of poems about abuse and desire in a society that condones the former and restricts equal access to the latter, netting her an American Book Award the following year.

The intertwinement of man and nature occurs not just at a thematic level, but at a textual one, in Priest’s poems, which are often punctuated by halting breaks between stanzas that propel you forward, rapt, to the next indelible image. Her second collection, 2018’s *Sublime Subliminal*, features rhymes like “krill” / “mill” that feel playful in isolation but together paint a landscape in which the boundaries between the personal, the animal, and the environmental have been blurred.

Interconnectivity is not just something Priest preaches, but a tenet she put into practice in her profession, as evidenced by her above-and-beyond involvement in the Bellingham poetry community, and in Washington writ large. For Priest, poetry is social — something meant to be experienced together in rooms — and her commitment to the art as a communal practice, in addition to her talent, has made her a favorite among her peers. Kathleen Flenniken, Washington State Poet

Laureate from 2012 to 2014, says that Priest’s work is “quick on its feet and moves in ingenious ways,” praising her successor for being able to “dispense hard messages, beautiful images, and jokey observations, sometimes all at the same time.” Michael Schmeltzer, the Seattle-based poet who published Priest’s second book, calls her work is “as cerebral as it is playful.”

“Rena is ambitious; her list of achievements and awards testifies to that trait,” Bellingham-based poet J.I. Kleinberg adds. “But whatever she can attain through her own efforts, she shares generously with family, friends, and community. What benefits Rena benefits all of us.”

Since coming home, Priest has been trying to think good things about her people; it would seem they have also been thinking good things about her.

Humanities Washington spoke with Priest on the eve of her appointment as Washington State Poet Laureate about the position and about her belief in the power of poetry. The following interview was edited for length and clarity.

Humanities Washington: You’ve said before that growing up in a tribal community feels like living two lives. Do you think poetry can come from that feeling — or that it can be a way to bridge the distance between those lives?

Rena Priest: Totally. I feel like it’s been a tool for me to navigate that, and to make these associated leaps between seemingly unrelated things — and to try to merge them somehow, because there’s a cognitive dissonance that happens [between] what you’re taught in school and then what you’re taught at home. They’re just so contrary in some ways, and you have to find a way to make them compatible.

I’ll give you an example: I wish that I knew my native language fluently. I’m learning it right now. We don’t have a word for “poem” or “poetry” in the language, but the language itself is so poetic. Then there’s this mistrust of the English language in my tribal community. It’s not held by everyone, obviously, I don’t want to generalize. But I remember an elder saying, “English is the language of the treaties, and if you embrace the English language, you embrace the values of the colonizer.”

I thought about that a lot. And I was like, “Oh my God.” [English] is this language that I love so much, and it’s the only one that I know how to express myself in. [Canadian poet] Lee

Maracle talks about repatriating language, and how language is a part of our DNA. It's a deep part of our physiology and how we understand the world. It's structurally — physically — a part of who you are. If you don't have the language of your ancestors, your body is aware of that emptiness of that. There's a chasm in your way of understanding the world. I feel like poetry has maybe helped me to answer that a little bit.

How do you feel your voice has shifted since *Patriarchy Blues*? From the interpersonal to the global, maybe?

Yeah, definitely. I think part of that has to do with being in my tribal community. I wrote most of *Patriarchy Blues* when I was living in New York. [In New York], there's this feeling, I think, in hindsight, that you're ground down and there's no place for you. You're constantly bombarded with images and representations of women as fulfilling a role that is secondary and at the service of men. It was a lot to be under that and trying to climb out. It was also a big contrast to how things are in my tribal community. A lot of my work responded to that feeling.

Whereas now my work seems to be responding toward gratitude for what a beautiful place we have, and that really what's at stake is this amazing planet if we don't care for it — all these different species that are struggling, including us. I feel it takes a toll on people, emotionally and psychologically, to be living in ways that are so contrary to our nature, to how we've evolved for millions of years.

Why did you come home to Washington after New York?

Well, this is personal. I think part of it was starting to see things go sideways in my marriage and thinking, "Oh gosh, what's going to happen with me and my little daughter? Are we going to have to go to the women's shelter?" It was that feeling — and then the feeling of needing to come home, wanting to come home, for that reason.

But then also, I remember that we came home for a visit. We were at the beach with my brother and his children, who were approximately the same age as my daughter, and they were playing on the beach, and she turned over a rock, and saw a little crab scuttling away. And she just flipped out with joy: "Oh, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, there's a big crab, c'mon, la la la la."

I was like, "Oh, she's not having these experiences that were so formative for me. She's not connecting to this place the way that I had the opportunity to do."

That really made me sad. I was like, "Man, I think I need to come home."

"The ability of language used intentionally, to get to the heart of something, to get down to the structural building blocks of human experience — it just has this profound way of reaching into people..."

You're Washington's first poet laureate from a tribal community, which is an important precedent, but do you also feel like a burden of responsibility comes with it — the weight of all that history?

Well, there is going to be some of that. But also we're all raised from a very young age, growing up, to know that we have this responsibility. We're aware. The elders and the parents and the aunties and uncles, they tell you, "You're going to have to go to school. You're going to have to learn everything you can. Don't talk back to the teachers. Don't argue with them, listen to them, try to respect what they're saying. Just take what you can out of it — take the good out of it."

Then you learn the truth and you learn your responsibility to it. You learn your responsibility to protecting the treaties and your treaty rights, and your homelands, and the future generations, and the elders. There's always this weight of responsibility that comes with being an Indigenous person in this country. It's heavy. To be able to celebrate my identity in this forum is really just a blessing because that responsibility is always there, no matter what. I have a platform to be able to speak the kinds of truths that I think that people will be appreciative of — or maybe resistant to.

You're planning to read more poetry in tribal communities to foster healing and justice. Why do you believe poetry has the power to address some of those historic wrongs?

I think poetry is so powerful for its ability to use metaphor to bind together seemingly disconnected things — and also to just reach into a person. Even the sounds of it. One of the things that I love most about poetry is its kind of built-in, innate music and language, the rhythm, the scales. I love the vowel scale. I get a big kick out of it all the time. But the ability of poetry,

the ability of language used intentionally, to get to the heart of something, to get down to the structural building blocks of human experience — it just has this profound way of reaching into people, and relating, giving them a doorway to relate to each other, to relate to experiences.

I once read a Charles Simmons essay in which he talks about the function of poetry, and compares it to a machine that takes what's inside of me and puts it inside of you, and we're connected that way. I love that so much.


You've been writing poems since you were a child. At what point did you feel comfortable calling yourself a poet?

I think, earlier this morning? [laughs] No, I think probably when I went away to graduate school to study it, maybe.

I read this really sad story about — who was it? I think it was Carolyn Forché — and she met some famous poet, maybe [W.H.] Auden or something. I'll have to find this at some point. But she's a famous poet in her own right, and she's at this party, where she meets this other famous poet who asks her, "So, what do you do?" She'd never met him before, and she knew that he had no idea who she was, so he wouldn't have known that she also was a poet.

She said, "I'm a poet."

Then he said that that was pretentious, and nobody calls themselves a poet. And she said something like, "I never called myself a poet after that," because she was horrified.

I said, "Oh my God, that's so awful." And I think maybe, when I read that, I was like, "Well, fuck that, I'm a poet." Sorry for the language. I was like, "If that's what you are in your soul, embrace it." Who's to say otherwise, you know? 

Samantha Allen is the author of *Real Queer America: LGBT Stories from Red States* and a contributing opinion columnist for *Crosscut*.



HUMANITIES WASHINGTON SPEAKER SPOTLIGHT: *Lauri Hennessey*



THIRTY YEARS AGO, Lauri Hennessey was involved in a sexual harassment scandal in Washington, DC, with Oregon Senator Bob Packwood. While Lauri reported the behavior and cooperated fully

with the Ethics Committee investigation that ultimately led to the Senator's resignation, she had been conditioned for years to keep quiet and never speak publicly about the experience.

Now that the Packwood case has been superseded by numerous other high-profile sexual harassment cases, Lauri is ready to share her experience with the hope of putting a stop to such abuses of power. In a free talk she's giving online and around the state, "What I Learned from My #MeToo Journey," she asks, "What will it take to finally change our political culture so that we have no more #MeToos? How can we all do better together?"

Lauri is certainly not one to shy away from hard conversations: "Maybe not everyone will agree with me as I look back on those days and what I learned from my own sexual harassment story," she says, "But I am willing to learn and talk with others. These issues are still raw, still part of our workplace today. I am excited to give people a chance to talk together about them."

Lauri currently serves as the CEO of the League of Education Voters and is finishing her Master's in Public Interest Communications from the University of Florida. Her hope is to teach college students how to use communications to change the world. In what little spare time she has, Lauri likes to host podcasts, blog, and sing.

NEWS

from Humanities Washington

Check out expanded video conversations online



From hip-hop history to the sociology of clutter, Humanities Washington is holding more recorded video conversations than ever. Join scholars, writers, and activists for fascinating but accessible deep dives into important current topics on our YouTube channel, including: “Survival and Sustainability: Climate Justice for Pacific Islanders,” “Uncounted: The History and Impact of Voter Suppression,” and “A Brief History of Your Messy House.”

...but also join us in person!

Yes, we love how technology can bring great conversations into your living room. But there's still nothing like exploring ideas face-to-face. For the last several months, we've worked with hosts around the state to safely present in-person events at libraries, museums, and other venues. Though the future still remains uncertain, we're hoping to continue adding more as 2022 continues. Check out our calendar for events near you at humanities.org/events.

Humanities Washington provides over a million dollars in grants to Washington cultural organizations recovering from the pandemic

In what is likely a first, every museum and cultural center in the state shut down at some point in the past two years. Empty auditoriums and vacant exhibit spaces meant a devastating loss not only of valuable community gathering places, but of revenue for a sector that already operates on thin margins. In 2021, we were honored to be able to provide grants to cultural organizations in our state thanks to the American Rescue Plan. In all, 122 organizations received funding, with an emphasis on organizations that were BIPOC-led or served rural communities. The funds went to organizations whose mission and/or programming engaged the public in the humanities.

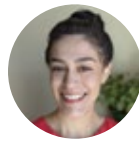
The Center for Washington Cultural Traditions announces new year-long foodways initiative

The food you, your family, and community makes and eats tells an important story. Food traditions are brimming with information about history, migrations, ethnic heritage, regional identities, economics, and more. To better understand Washington's cultural landscape through its foodways, the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions is launching its second initiative in January at sites around the state focused on the food traditions of different communities. Work already began in King and Spokane counties, and will now expand to surveying traditions in southeastern Washington. Activities include recorded interviews, photo and video documentation, and podcasts, and events include a symposium, a public festival, and virtual discussions. Learn more at waculture.org.



▲ Felipe Hernandez of Los Hernandez Tamales in Union Gap, part of previous foodways research by the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions.

Humanities Washington staff news



We're delighted to add Violeta Martin as our new grants and outreach manager. Violeta has a Bachelor's degree in comparative literature and the history of ideas from Willamette University and a Master's in Latin American and Caribbean

Studies from New York University. Violeta has previously worked in higher education supporting first-generation students via college access and success organizations.



We are also proud to announce that our director of programs, Stone Addington, received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Washington in November of 2021.

Board of Trustees

Shandy Abrahamson, *Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*
Julieta Altamirano-Crosby, *WAGRO Foundation*
René Baca, *Wenatchee Valley College*
Annmarie Caño, *Gonzaga University*
Xavier Cavazos, *Central Washington University*
Andrew Chanse, *Spokane Public Libraries*
Peter Danelo, *Heller Ehrman (retired)*
Eric Davis, *Bellevue College*
Senator Karen Fraser, *22nd District, Thurston County (retired)*
Betsy Godlewski, *Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture*
Beth Hudson, *Walla Walla Public Library (retired)*
Eric Lawson, *University of Washington*
Mark Miyake, *Western Washington University*
Clarence Moriwaki, *Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community*
Mary Pembroke-Perlin, *Community volunteer*
David Powers (chair), *Seattle University*
Bradley Richardson, *Clark County Historical Museum*
Joe Ross, *Gates Archive*
Colleen Rozillis, *Moss Adams*
Carli Schiffner, *Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges*

Staff

George Abeyta, *Program Manager*
Stone Addington, *Director of Programs*
Tom Beasley, *Technology and Special Projects Manager*
Antonio Gómez, *Associate Folklorist*
David Haldeman, *Director of Communications and Content*
Rachel Jacobson, *Program and Development Coordinator*
Asia Lara, *Program Manager*
Violeta Martin, *Grant and Outreach Manager*
Eric Sanders, CPA, *Chief Financial Officer*
Shelley Saunders, *Chief Resource Development Officer*
Langston Collin Wilkins, *Director, Center for Washington Cultural Traditions*
Julie Ziegler, *Chief Executive Officer*

OUR MISSION

*Humanities Washington opens minds and bridges divides
by creating spaces to explore different perspectives.*

OUR PROGRAMS



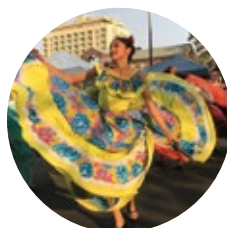
FAMILY READING uses storytelling and discussion to explore cultural and ethical themes in children's literature and emphasizes the importance of families reading together.



WASHINGTON STATE POET LAUREATE builds awareness and appreciation of poetry – including the state's legacy of poetry – through public readings, workshops, lectures, and presentations throughout the state. Managed in partnership with ArtsWA.



GRANTS assist local organizations in creating opportunities for their community to come together to discuss important issues using the humanities.



CENTER FOR WASHINGTON CULTURAL TRADITIONS is a new effort to amplify our state's rich, diverse living cultural treasures through research and special programming. Managed in partnership with ArtsWA.



SPEAKERS BUREAU draws from a pool of leading cultural experts and scholars to provide free conversational lectures in communities throughout the state.



MEDIA PROJECTS brings online content such as live and recorded panel discussions and conversations, radio shows, and other accessible deep dives into important current topics to viewers on our YouTube channel.



THINK & DRINK brings hosted conversations on provocative topics and new ideas to pubs and tasting rooms in Bellingham, Spokane, Seattle, Tacoma, and Yakima.



130 Nickerson St., Suite 304
Seattle, WA 98109

NON-PROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE
PAID
SEATTLE, WA
PERMIT NO. 2389

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

Changes? Please make the corrections on your address label, check the appropriate box below, and return to Humanities Washington.

- ☐ *Name misspelled*
- ☐ *Contact person changed*
- ☐ *Address wrong*
- ☐ *Duplicate mailing*
- ☐ *Remove from mailing list*

*Or send changes via email to
info@humanities.org*

